Research Proposal

Impact of Grassroot Democracy

in Rural West Bengal :

A Study of Khandaghosh Block in Purba Bardhaman District

A Synopsis

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State of the Art :

In present India, the concept of Grassroot Democracy is a new wrapping gift to the civilized society. The history of the development of Grassroot Democracy in India is a spontaneous, natural and deeply intertwined with its past tradition and culture. The existence of local government in ancient India is found in Rigveda, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Aitaraya Brahmana, Panini's Ashtadhyayi, Manusanghita, Kautilya's Arthashastra, Inscription of Ashokan pillars and writing of Buddhist and Jain scholars. During the medieval period, especially the Sultanate and Mughal period, the main function of the local government (panchayat) were education, public health, punishment of lawbreakers and establishment of administrative justice as well as resolution of village conflicts. With the establishment of British rule in India, the European style of local government system was developed. Lord Ripon's resolution was very important in this context. Other important steps in the development of local government were the Royal Commission on decentralization in 1907, the Montague Chelmsford report in 1918, the government of India act in 1919, and even the government of India act in 1935, all of which called for Subsuming local government under the state. The British government decided to recognize panchayat institutions as a unit of local government for various purpose such as collecting revenue, suppressing the national movement of educated youth and strengthening the foundation of colonial rule everywhere.

Since ancient times the rural panchayat system has been intimately associated with the Indian system as an inspiring means of development. But after independence the framers of the Constitution were indifferent to the panchayat system, so the panchayat system was included in Article 40 of the directive principles instead of the main part of the Constitution. Later, more than 25 years later, based on the recommendations of various committees and commissions such as Balwant Rao Mehta committee in 1957, Ashok Mehta committee in 1977, G. V. K. Rao committee in 1985, L. M. Singhvi committee in 1986, the central government incorporated the panchayati raj system into the original Constitution through the 73rd Constitutional amendment in 1992 and empowered the states to form panchayats. This principle of democratic decentralization transfers decision making power from the central government Or state governments to local self governments. Pandit Nehru said in the inaugural address of panchayati raj, "local self-government is must and be the basis of any true system of democracy. People have got into the habit to thinking of democracy of the top and so much below.

Democracy at the top may not be a success unless you build its foundation from below".

The Constitution of India through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992 guaranteed institutional existence to panchayat institutions and marked a milestone in the process of ensuring economic and social justice at the doorstep of the people by establishing a decentralized democratic administration. Currently representatives of panchayat like Lok Sabha and State Assemblies are also directly elected by the people through democratic process and elected representatives of various political parties play a very important role in the decision making process. As a result, the ideology of democratic decentralization has become more widespread and democracy has taken root of the grassroot level of society. Institution like Gram Sabha and Gram Sangsad have been formed in rural areas to ensure effective participation of the people in the developmental process, through which direct democracy is expected to be established.

Organizations like Gram Sabha and Gram Sangsad have made grassroot democracy more meaningful and participatory. These organizations advise the Gram Panchayat on matters of rural development and social justice. As the lowest unit of grass root level people in rural areas, Gram Sabha/ Gram Sangsad is playing an important role in promoting unity among all communities in the village without any discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, gender, creed and social status. In this democratic platform at the grassroot level, local people can directly participate in the decision-making process and voice their opinions.

Review of related literature :

Bishwanath Chakraborty in his book **"Outline of panchayat system in W.B" (2008)** showed regarding the role of women representatives in West Bengal Panchayati Raj system. He pointed out that lack of education, dominance of masculinity, conflict of political parties and environment of violence, existing reforms in the society and even financially dependent women cannot actively participate in politics.

Harihar Bhattachariya in his book **"Making Local Democracy Work in India" (2002)** he nicely shown that the panchayat dose not take its own decision, the decision is imposed on it, which is dangerous.

S.K. Singh's article on **"73rd Constitution Amendment: An Analytical Framework" (1993)** summarizes the main provisions of the 73rd constitutional amendment act.

Md. Ayub Mallick in his book **"Panchayati Raj and Tribal Development in West Bengal" (2012)** has highlighted how tribal areas have developed along with the development of local government in West Bengal.

Jayashri Ghosh in his book **"Political Participation of Women in West Bengal" (2000)** has comparatively presented all the aspects of women especially in the political life of West Bengal. It attempts to indicate an analysis of the nature and extent of women's Participation in the development of society.

L.N. Sharma in his excellent case study **"Panchayati Raj Institutions" (1998)** highlights the importance of Panchayati Raj Institutions in rural development. In this article he focused the problems of policy makers, involvement of elites and causes of unemployment among people.

K. Chakraborty and S.K. Bhattarcharya in their book **"Leadership faction and panchayati raj" (1993)** bring out the working of democracy of grassroot levels in West Bengal and points serious problems in terms of political awareness and participation. The book aptly notes the undercurrent of change and nature of change in leadership of PRI, and interaction of political equals with socio-economically unequal with a tilt in the latter's favour by PRI under Jyoti Basu regime in West Bengal. It underlines the significant change in the nature of rural power structures and a just balance of rural forces with system oriented towards the poor. It reflects the instrumental role of decentralized democracy in influencing the ম্interaction between social milieu and eco-political development.

Swapan Kumar Pramanik and probhat Dutta in a study titled **"Panchayats and People: The West Bengal Experience" (1994)** conducted a field survey on the functioning of Gram Panchayats leaders and concerned officials. The study focuses on the social content of Panchayat leaders and their role perception, the role of political parties in the functioning of Gram Panchayats and their initiatives as instruments of social change and mass mobilization etc.

K.B. Sukla's contribution **"Panchayati Raj Revisited" (1978)** is a detailed analysis of the report of the Asoka Mehta Committee on Panchayati Raj Institutions (1979), which maintained that the remodelling of the Panchayati Raj Institutions, formulation of their structures, functions and the utilizations of financial, administrative and human resources of these institutions be determined on the emerging functional necessity of management of rural development.

In **Shiviah's** article **"Decentralisation and Panchayati Raj: A Developmental Perspective" (July, 1978)** he suggests that decentralization has a more complex dimension, political-cum-administrative. He also pointed out the vital role of 'Democratic Decentralization' for development in rural areas.

Dr. Prantosh Sen in an excellent research work entitled "Official-Non-Official Relationship in the Panchayati Raj Institutions: A study of the emerging relationship patterns under the new Panchayat system in the district of Malda (W.B)" (1988) focused on the patterns of interaction and emerging relationship between 'officials' and 'Non-Officials' at the three levels of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Malda district. This research indicates the performance-gap between official and non-official relationship and has made a great historical survey of the existing structure and functions of Panchayati Raj Institutions before the introduction of the new system.

In **Siddhartha Dash's** article **"Panchayati Raj: Grassroot Democracy"** in odisha review **(February-March, 2007)** he showed that decentralization is a prime mechanism through which democracy becomes truly representative and responsive. The Democratic ideals of decentralization, development and increased, continuous and active popular participation in the process Nation-Building can be secured only through the working of an efficient system of local government, no Democratic political system can be expected to become stable and really developed.

Pranab Bardhan, Sandip Mitra, Dilip Mookherjee and Abhirup Sarkar's article **"Political Stability, Local Democracy and Clientelism in Rural West Bengal" (April, 2008)** examines political awareness, participation and the unusual stability of political power in rural West Bengal, using data from a household survey conducted by the authors during 2003-05. The authors examine variation of voting and other political behaviour across households of varying socio-economic characteristics.

Dr. SK Abdul Rashid in his research work entitled **"The Politics of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal since 1978: A Case Study of the Galshi Block in the District of Burdwan" (1998)** focused on the post 1978 Panchayats of West Bengal which are fundamentally different from the pre- 1978 Panchayats in terms of objectives, leadership and governance. Post 1978 Panchayats in West Bengal have played an effective role in bringing about major changes in the rural socio-economic sphere. He also explores how centralization have merged in the politics of Panchayati Raj in West Bengal since 1978.

Neil Webster in his famous research work entitled **"The Panchayati Raj and the Decentralisation of Development Planning in West Bengal" (1992)** has done a case study on two Gram Panchayats of Burdwan district and has shown how much role Panchayats have played in implementing development programs since 1985 by introducing decentralised planning. Panchayats had played a successful role in the implementation of developmental programs in the rural society and political upliftment of the people. He mentioned the socio-economic background of Panchayat members, absence of women in panchayats, control of Panchayats by the ruling party and how power is shifted to the people.

Probhat Dutta in his book **"Prasanga Panchayat" (2013)** has discussed the West Bengal Panchayat System from a legal and constitutional point of view. Panchayat have taken many developmental programmes sponsored by both central and state governments to implement the rural development with the active participation of the poor people. Dutta point out the difference of leadership pattern between Congress and left front. In the leftist period leadership had been elected from peasants, workers and the village artisans. According to him three main objectives of the rural development are to make balance between agricultural production and industrial expansion, to remove the inequality between rich and poor, and to develop the agricultural production.

Harihar Bhattacharyya in his book **"Micro Foundation of Bengal Communism" (1998)** in chapter- 4 titled **'Bengal Communism and Panchayats: Operation of Micro Democracy'** discussed the Panchayats system in West Bengal in theoretical view of points. He noted that Panchayats have played an important role in rural development but have faced challenges in terms of democracy and Decentralisation. According to him party control over Panchayats has hampered the democratic character of village panchayats.

Ashok Kumar Mukhopadhyay in his book **"Panchayat Administration in West Bengal" (1991)** discussed the structure, composition, power and functions of the Panchayat System in West Bengal. He recognised the role of Panchayats in economic development, modernization and development of new leadership at the grassroot level. He also argued that leadership patterns of Panchayati Raj Institutions had transformed from a dominant power group to a politicised lower middle strata.

Atul Kohli in his book **"The State and Poverty in India" (1987)** gives an outline of the Panchayat System in West Bengal before and after 1978. According to him the post- 1978 Panchayat System as the grassroot institution of rural local government in West Bengal attracted global attention. During this period panchayats were highly politicised by the party (CPI-M), the (CPI-M) used the politicised Panchayat to impose political influence on rural society. He also showed that in this period there was a change in the basic structure of rural politics in West Bengal, institutional power was transformed from the hands of the dominant propertied group to the hands of the politicised lower-middle strata.

Dr. Soumen Roy in his article **"Institutionalization of Grassroot Democracy in Rural West Bengal" (December-2018)** has shown that grassroot democracy is the main pillar of democratic decentralization. It's main objective is to establish a democratic society based on the voluntary consent of the people rather than force of arms or muscle. Through which political, administrative and financial power truly reaches the common people of the country.

Md Kamal Hossain in his article **"Participatory Democracy in Rural Local Government of West Bengal" (January- 2023)** highlighted the active participation of local people in the political process at the grassroot level and the implications of 73rd amendment Act.

Biswanath Chakraborty in his research work entitled **"Democracy, Opposition Space and Peoples' Participation in West Bengal: An Empirical Study"** in the first chapter of the book **"Democracy and Governance in the 21st Century: India & the World"** edited by **Abhishek Karmakar, Shilpa Nandy, Partha Sarathi Dey and Bimalendu Ghosh (2023),** has done a survey on Darjeeling and West Midnapur district in West Bengal and highlighted the backwardness of the democratic environment. He also highlighted the extent to which the democratic rights of the opposition political parties and common people in the state of West Bengal have been undermined during the rule of Congress, Left Front and Trinamool Congress.

Statement of the problem :

This research paper will examine the aspects that hindered/ are hindering the development of grassroot democracy in post-independence West Bengal and provide a comparative review of democratic development at the grassroot level during the Congress, Left Front and Trinamool Congress regimes.

Aims, Objectives and Motivation :

(1) To find out how much rural people are aware of democracy.
(2) To inquire whether the local people can freely participate in the democratic process.
(3) To inquire whether the meetings of Gram Sabha and Gram Sangsad are held regularly at certain times of the year.
(4) To find out the relationship between the opposition political party and the rulling political party.
(5) To inquire whether the local people can enjoy the benefits of various government schemes irrespective of party affiliation.

Hypothesis :

All the hypothesis are formulated in alternative form for testing as elucidated below:

(1) A large segment of the rural population is expressing interest in participating in democratic activities.
(2) The activity of opposition political parties has increased compared to the past.
(3) The rulling party's nepotism has decreased to a great extent compared to the past.

Research Design and Methodology :

(1) Research Design: The present study will adopt both qualitative and quantitative research method.

(2) Population of the Study: All the adult voters of Khandaghosh Block will constitute the population of the present study.

(3) Sample of the Study: For the present study, some number of government employees, Private Sector Employees, Political Conscious Persons, Farmers, Housewives, Labours, Minorities, Educated Men and Women, Adult Students and Senior Citizens will be selected as a samples from the total population of Khandaghosh Block with the help of random sampling technique.

(4) Tools and Techniques of Data Collection: Data for the present study will be collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data will be collected from face to face interviews with the help of a schedule. Secondary sources of data will be collected from books, Journals, Newspaper, Media and others documents.

(5) Data Analysis: Descriptive and Inferential statistical techniques will be used to analyse the data.

Relevance to the Present Day problem and Need of the Society :

25 years after independence, based on the reports of various committees and commissions, the central government through the 73rd constitutional amendment in 1992 incorporated the panchayati raj system into the original constitution and empowered the states to form panchayats. This principle of democratic decentralization transfers decision-making power from the central government or state governments to local governments. The present study will show whether local democratic institutions have succeeded in making rural people politically aware as well as ensuring the rate of public participation in local democratic systems. That is, whether democracy has reached the grassroot level.

Contribution to the Existing Knowledge :

The present study would be delimited to the 10 Gram panchayats of Khandaghosh Block of Purba Bardhaman District of the state of West Bengal. As per 2011 census, the total population of Khandaghosh Block is 189336.The central government incorporated the Panchayati Raj system into the main constitution through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, delegating decision-making power

to local institutions by empowering the states to form Panchayats. The present study will attempt to show the extent to which local democratic institutions have made the rural people politically aware.

Future Work :

This research paper will increase further research interest of other researchers in the following areas-

- Relevance of Panchayati Raj institutions to rural people of West Bengal in 21st century.
- Reluctance of rural people to participate in democratic activities.
- Political awareness among women and Backward class people in West Bengal after Trinamool Congress came to power (2011).
- Effect of ruling party nepotism on democratic system in West Bengal.
- Relationship between opposition political parties and rulling political parties in West Bengal.

Tentative Chapterisation :

(1) The Conceptual Genealogy of Grassroot Democracy in India: An Outline.
(2) A Brief Profile of Khandaghosh Block.
(3) Development of Grassroot Democracy During Congress and Left Front Period after Independence.
(4) Development of Grassroot Democarcy since Trinamool Congress Came to Power.
(5) Role of Local People in Implementing of Democratic Character in Khandaghosh Block.